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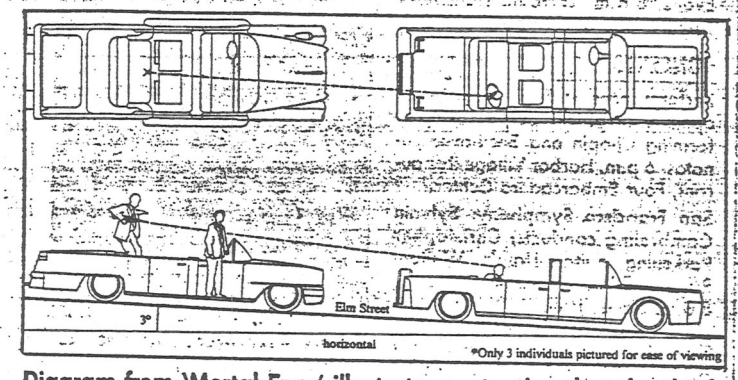

Diagram from 'Mortal Error' illustrates contention that the third, and fatal, shot was fired from the Secret Service follow-up car

Startling Theory In New JFK Book

Expert points to errant Secret Service bullet

By Stephen Hunter
Baltimore Sun

Towson, Md.

It's a tale of two rifles.

It's a tale of three bullets.

It's a tale of a dead president, a still-grieving nation and a thousand unanswered questions.

But most of all it's a tale of a Towson, Md., man's obsession with finding the truth.

It's Howard Donahue's tale, contained in a just-released book titled "Mortal Error: The Shot That Killed JFK," by Bonar Menninger, which chronicles Donahue's odyssey through the thickets of ballistic evidence, governmental obstructionism and what he views as media indifference.

The book embraces Donahue's conclusion that although Lee Harvey Oswald shot at and hit President Kennedy with bullets from a

Ballistics specialist Howard Donahue: 'friendly fire' idea

6.5mm Mannlicher-Carcano rifle, the fatal bullet that destroyed the president's skull came from another source.

Kennedy, Howard Donahue believes, was killed by friendly fire.

And in the book, he names the friend who fired, a Secret Service agent who was in the follow car in the Dallas motorcade and rose heroically to return fire on the assassin but instead accidentally fired a round in the wrong direction.

Donahue's contention has invited immediate scorn and puts him at odds with other groups' theories about the assassination.

Theory Dismissed

"The theory is, like all the others, just wrong," says David W. Belin, the former Warren Commission counsel.

And Bob Snow, a spokesman for the Secret Service, said, "If I used the word 'ridiculous,' that would be the mildest thing I could say." He would not give out any information on the agent in question, citing employee confidentiality.

Attempts by Donahue, Menninger and Thomas McCormack, chairman of the book's publisher, St. Martin's, to approach the agent in question were rebuffed with silence or threats of lawsuits.

McCormack said he drafted a letter last November to the agent, now retired and living in the Washington area.

"I figured the allegation was very distressing to the man," McCormack said. "Basically, I said (in the letter) that if he could have talked us out of it, we wouldn't have published the book. But we never heard back from him."

No Libel Meant

McCormack contends that since "Mortal Error" does not say the former agent acted out of negligence or malice, the assertion that he accidentally fired a shot that hit Kennedy is not libelous.

But J. Hamilton Brown, executive director of the Former Agents of the Secret Service Association, based in Alexandria, Va., said the

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listic evidence shows that the ad-shot bullet came from anoth- direction.

Here is what happened that ay, according to Donahue:

Oswald fired only twice at Kenedy. His first bullet struck pavement and sprayed the limousine with fragments, one of which struck Kennedy in the head. The second, the so-called "magic bullet," penetrated the president's neck (probably a mortal wound) and Connally, as the Warren Commission said. In fact, Donahue is one of the few people who has studied the assassination who endorses the "magic bullet" theory.

At that point, a Secret Service agent in the follow-up Cadillac stood up with an AR-15 assault rifle. As he turned toward the Texas School Book Depository, he slipped backward and the rifle fired, striking the president on a left-to-right axis high in the head, fragmenting inside his brain and blowing out the right side of his skull, Donahue says.

That rifle's presence was acknowledged in some Warren Commission testimony, though it eluded Donahue's notice for years, even though he had concluded early on that the bullet angles in the skull meant that the fatal shot had to have come from some other source.